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Health Appeals in Television Food Advertising: A Social Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

Lay beliefs about health generally, and health in relation to food in particular, are interesting and moderately researched topics. However, within these areas of study, little consideration has been given to the socially constructed nature of these so-called beliefs and values. Additionally, research that has explored the meaning and ideological significance of advertising has tended to do so in a static way, relying almost entirely upon the researcher's necessarily subjective analysis of print advertisements, while overlooking the active and constructive role of people in creating meaning. Based on the theoretical understanding that advertising, as a social and linguistic medium, both reproduces and creates cultural meanings, this study explores how the concept of health is appropriated in television advertisements for food products. In this way, the ideological implications of the meaningful relationships between health and food in modern consumer culture are elucidated.

Fourteen ads for food products, which made some appeal to health, were recorded from free to air television. These ads targeted either middle-class mothers or independent, working women. Two focus group discussions were conducted, employing women from each of the target consumer groups as participants. These groups are referred to as *mothers* and *singles* respectively. In the focus group discussions, participants viewed and talked about the ads. A semiotic deconstruction of each of the ads was also undertaken. This involved breaking down the sign systems operating in the ads, in order to identify the underlying cultural assumptions about food and health. Semiotic interpretations of ads were grounded in real-world lay readings produced by participants.

Drawing upon these interpretations, it is argued that for women, food and health discourses, particularly where they intersect, are sites of tension and contradiction, creating considerable food related anxiety and ambivalence. Appeals to health in food advertisements conflate health and beauty concerns to disguise and reinforce moral judgements based on body weight. Social constructions of the 'good mother', as evidenced in advertising, hold mothers responsible for the dietary health of children. At the same time, dominant nutritional science explanations of the relationship between health and food disempower women by privileging expert knowledge. Women are ideologically positioned through food and health discourses in oppressive ways characterised by irresolvable moral dilemmas. This study makes a clear social contribution by exposing the assumptions and myths underlying food and health meanings, and thereby laying them open to challenge.

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